

## ENCOUNTERING OUR SHADOW

**Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**  
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Nearly every day we are confronted with yet another example of the unsettling inconsistency between people's professed values and their actual behavior.

- A widely admired minister who has publicly condemned homosexuality is accused of giving cars and other gifts to young men in exchange for sexual favors.
- Yet another married politician admits to an extramarital affair.
- A bookkeeper for a charitable organization is discovered to have been stealing funds for her personal use over a period of several years.
- A high school coach admits to having an illegal sexual relationship with one of his student athletes.
- A government spends billions of dollars on foreign military operations while one-sixth of its nation's families struggle to live in poverty.

The list could go on, but I think you get my point. Our news media thrive on exposing misconduct by public figures and inviting the rest of us to condemn **their** reprehensible behavior. In doing so, however, we avoid a deeper and more personal question that can be directed to **all of us**: "How is it that there can be so many discrepancies between our professed values . . . and our many embarrassing, often destructive, behaviors?" This is the question posed by James Hollis in his book *Why Good People Do Bad Things* [p. 2]

The popular answer, fed by media attention, is that people in positions of power and wealth are unusually susceptible to moral corruption. But Hollis offers a different explanation—one that is based on the concept of the **Shadow** in the psychology of Carl Jung. "The Shadow," Hollis explains, "is composed of all those aspects of ourselves that have a tendency to make us **uncomfortable with ourselves.**" [p. 9] And so our Shadow influences us without our awareness. The Shadow lives in **all of us**—not just the celebrities who are caught in the act.

Our conscious ego employs several strategies to keep the Shadow at bay. "**Shadow work,**" as the Jungians call it, involves penetrating the walls that separate us from our Shadow:

denial, avoidance, repression, and above all **projection**, which involves **attributing the qualities we deny in ourselves to other people**. To me, understanding how projection works is the gateway to understanding how the Shadow operates in our personal lives and in our collective behavior.

How can we penetrate the formidable wall of projection? One way suggested by James Hollis is to identify **what annoys you most about your partner**, or other people in general. Chances are, the qualities you find most annoying in others are the very same ones you deny in yourself. Robert Bly offers a vivid description of how marriage can involve the reciprocal entanglement of Shadows between a man and a woman. The example he offers, based on his personal experience, is the unacknowledged transfer of the groom's "witch mother" to his new wife and the bride's "tyrant father" to her new husband. The particular qualities that couples project on each other is not as significant as the fact that they do so "unconsciously" until the complementarity that originally attracted them to one another turns into conflict and mutual hostility. What each partner eventually discovers in one another is the Shadow they deny in themselves. As James Hollis puts it, "Shadow work requires a heroic willingness to take responsibility for oneself, to grow up, and therefore be less demanding and expectant of their partners. This allows them the freedom we wish for ourselves—the freedom to have different tastes, different development agendas, different friends, and so forth. . . . Most of all, Shadow work in the context of relationship asks that we see that what is wrong in the world is wrong in us, as well." [Hollis, p. 218-19]

Arguably the most urgent Shadow work that needs to be done is at the level of international understanding. Nowhere is the Shadow's influence more evident than in our attitude toward our perceived enemies. The conflict between Islamic and Western civilization is a classic example of how reciprocal projection of the Shadow can have mutually destructive consequences. Thanks to the Internet and other media, each side in this conflict is provided with ample information to fuel their mutual hatred and mistrust. By pointing to the expressions of Muslim hostility toward Western nations, we can avoid confronting the fact that it is we who have invaded their countries. Thanks to the powerful mechanism of projection, we are most offended by the very same impulses that we deny in ourselves.

The very real possibility of terrorist attacks by Islamic militants has reinforced our Shadow-driven fears that it is they and not we who pose the greatest threat to world peace. Following the 9/11 attack, the late UU minister Forrest Church wrote, “The battle against terror—not a clash of civilizations but a clash between civilization and anarchy—demands an international front, not a self-appointed savior. American arrogance can only fan the flames American policy is designed to extinguish.” [*Spiritual Perspectives on America’s Role as Superpower*, p. 28] At a time when our government leaders are wrangling about wasteful spending, the amount of money our government devotes to military expenses is staggering: **two million dollars per second**. Can you believe that? Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether says that our government’s attempt to become the world’s dominant military superpower “must be questioned for its idolatrous moral absolutism, for its claims to represent good against evil, God against the Devil, resisting any self-critique of its own power.” [*ibid.*, p. 176] By labeling other nations and religions as evil, we risk becoming the dark force of evil that we say we are fighting against.

One of the boldest applications of the concept of the Shadow is Jung’s interpretation of the Book of Job, which he says is a story about the Shadow side of the Old Testament figure of Yahweh. Jung argues that by allowing the righteous Job to suffer needlessly, Yahweh reveals that he is actually **morally inferior** to man. What I sometimes refer to as Yahweh’s “You little twerp” speech at the end of the story, in which he recites his mighty deeds and then restores Job’s good fortune, is a reassertion of Yahweh’s omnipotence, but it fails to establish his benevolence. In Jung’s words, Yahweh “raises himself above his earlier primitive level of consciousness by indirectly acknowledging that the man Job is morally superior to him and that therefore he has to catch up and become man himself. . . . Yahweh must become man precisely because he has done man a wrong.” [C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, p. 88] In making this assertion, Jung in effect stands the Christian doctrine of the Atonement (Christ died for our sins) on its head. “Yahweh’s intention to become man, which resulted from his collision with Job, is fulfilled in Christ’s life and suffering.” [p. 96] In other words, Christ died not to atone for human sinfulness, but to atone for Yahweh’s sin against Job.

As you might imagine, Jung’s interpretation did not sit well with many Christians, who viewed Jung as an infidel or worse. James Hollis acknowledges that Jung’s interpretation of the

story of Job is “audacious, even preposterous, if taken literally. . . . What is to be healed is not Yahweh, who, after all, is only a metaphor for a particular tribal experience of transcendence, but rather the Western [image of God],” which divides the world into good versus evil, God versus the Devil, us versus them. “It is human consciousness, not God, that is summoned to enlargement. We are challenged to embrace the idea that the transcendent energies of the universe, which we experience as contradictions, are somehow one, somehow purposive, somehow [explainable], albeit not to us.” [Hollis, p. 178]

Acknowledging our own Shadow side—as individuals, as a congregation, as a nation—ultimately moves us toward **wholeness**, which in Jungian psychology is the ultimate goal of life. “Such wholeness,” says James Hollis, “is our chief service to our children, our partners, our society, and to the gods who brought us here for this mission. Thus, our Shadow work is an invocation to us, a calling forth, and carries the germ of our possible wholeness. The first place to look for the Shadow is (1) where our fears are found, (2) where we are most ugly to ourselves, or (3) for the many, daily deals we make, the adaptations, and the denials that only deepen the darkness. This challenging paradox remains: We will never experience healing until *we can come to love our unlovable places, for they, too, ask love of us.*” I am reminded of the poem titled “The Guest House,” by the Islamic mystic poet Rumi:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning is a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of your furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,

Meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

[in *Life Prayers*, ed. by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, p. 98]